

A MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM RESOURCE

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE: PUBLIC OPINION IN MICHIGAN

A compilation of polling data from 1995-2004

For over a decade, Michigan Family Forum has worked to highlight the importance of healthy marriages and the consequences of divorce. In the course of that work, we have conducted 4 polls to gauge the sentiments of the public on marriage and divorce. Our findings have been remarkably consistent. Adults believe the divorce rate is too high and that it has a negative impact on children. They also give relatively high marks to proposals that promote strong marriages and protect children, but are less receptive to punitive actions imposed on divorcing couples, such as restricting no-fault divorce.

Virtually everyone agrees that marriage is a private relationship. At the same time, almost everyone recognizes that marriage can have profound public consequences. For example, two married individuals will have better emotional and physical health than two similar individuals who are not married. Married couples tend to accumulate wealth at a greater pace than two unmarried individuals with similar incomes. Even in old age, married individuals are able to assist each other and maintain independence longer than single elders.

Marriage has an even more profound impact on children. Those who live with their married parents have greater success in school and jobs, enjoy greater emotional and physical health, are less likely to engage in risky behavior, and are less likely to be incarcerated. Either the public can bear the social and economic costs of failed marriages, or we can work to ensure that more marriages mark the beginning of a healthy, lifelong journey for two individuals.

Most people support some regulation of marriage by the government. Laws prohibiting polygamy, the marriage of children, or marriage among family members are widely supported. Other laws, such as blood tests, waiting periods for marriage licenses, and limitations on who may officiate at weddings are also common. And when marriages fail, the government practically takes over the lives of the family, dictating who can live where, when the children are in the custody of which parent, even how household items are divided.

The difficult task before us is to determine the right balance of government regulation in marriage. Is marriage a public institution that should be closely regulated by government? Or is it a wholly private matter that is already over-regulated? It is our hope that the information gleaned from these polls over the past ten years will shed light on this dilemma and help guide important family policy in Michigan.

About the Surveys:

December 1995, Communications Research Institute, Michigan State University. Interviewers contacted a random sample of 429 households statewide in which the respondent said he/she was a registered voter. Based on the survey sample, the margin of error is plus or minus 5 percent.

December 1997, Wirthlin Worldwide, McLean, Virginia. The survey interviewed 407 adults over the age of 18 and was designed to accurately reflect the state's adult population based on region, gender, age, and educational attainment. The margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 5 percent.

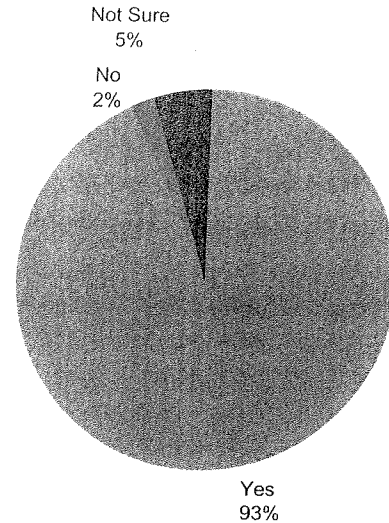
October 1999, EPIC/MRA, Lansing, MI. Interviewers conducted a statewide survey of 600 registered voters. The survey sample has a margin of error of plus or minus 4 percent.

November 2004, Mitchell Communications Inc., East Lansing, MI. The survey interviewed 500 registered voters statewide. The margin of error for the sample is plus or minus 4.5 percent.

Does Divorce Have a Long-Term Impact on Children? (1995)

Fact: Only 65% of individuals getting married in Michigan are doing so for the first time. 35% have been married at least once before.

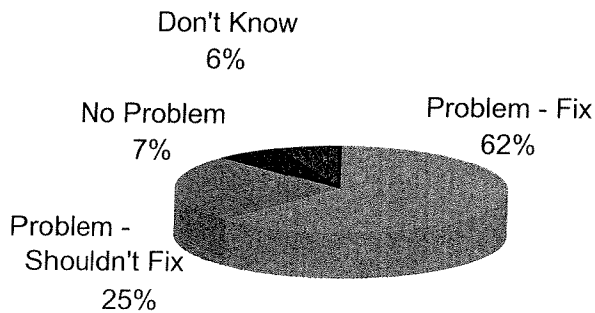
Michigan Vital Records & Health Data,
Michigan Department of Community Health



Is Divorce a Problem That Should Be Fixed? (2004)

What we asked:

When I think about divorce in society today, I think...

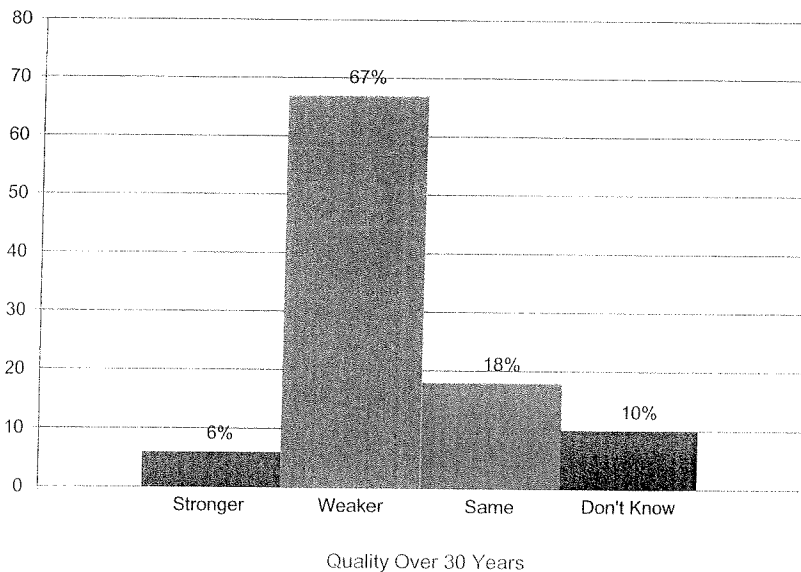


There is a problem, and we need to look for solutions.

There is a problem, but there isn't really anything we should do about it.

Things are actually pretty good, and there's not much of a problem.

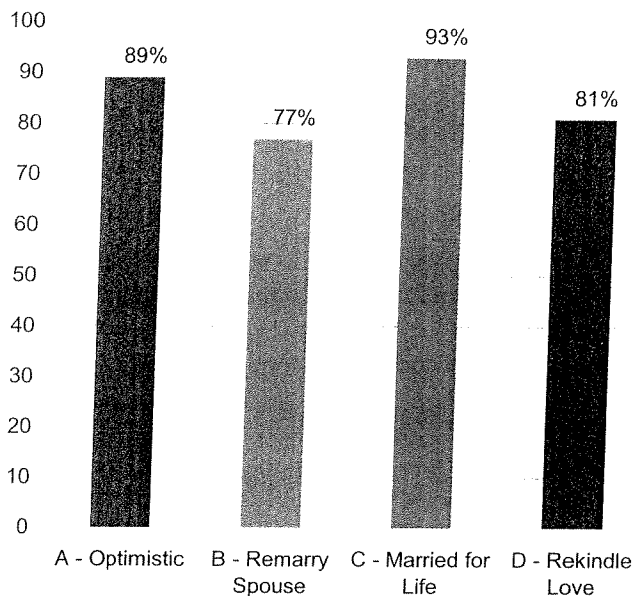
Quality of Marriage Today vs. Thirty Years Ago (1997)



What we asked:

Generally speaking, do you think that the quality of marriage in Michigan is stronger, weaker, or about the same as it was thirty years ago?

Views On Marriage (1997)



FACT: 365,620 children under 18 were involved in divorces from 1993-2003.

Michigan Vital Records & Health Data,
Michigan Department of Community Health

The vast majority of individuals responded "Yes" when asked if the following statements accurately reflected their views on marriage:

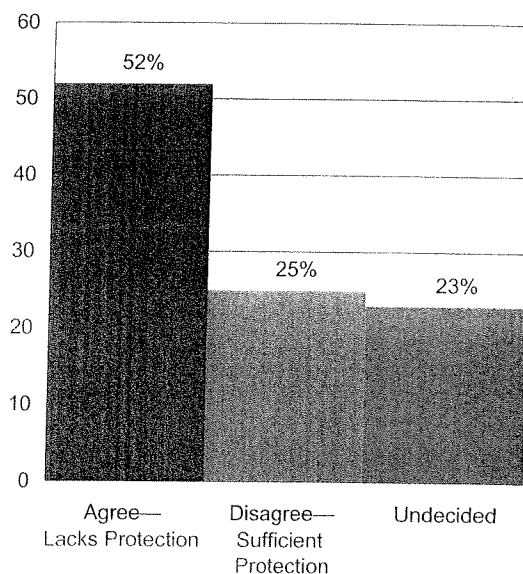
- A I had optimistic expectations entering marriage.
- B I would marry the same person if I could.
- C I expect to be married for life.
- D An unhappy couple should remain together and work to reestablish the love they once had.

Divorce Law Lacks Protection for Spouse Not Wanting Divorce (1999)

What we asked:

Now I am going to read several statements to you about Michigan's divorce laws. For each statement, please tell me if you agree or disagree with the statement:

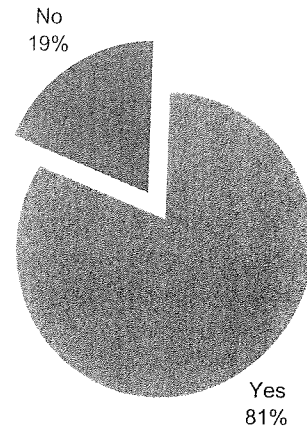
Current divorce laws do not provide enough protections for a spouse who does not want to get a divorce and wants to try to preserve the marriage. Do you Agree or Disagree?



Should Divorce Education Be Required? (1995)

What we asked:

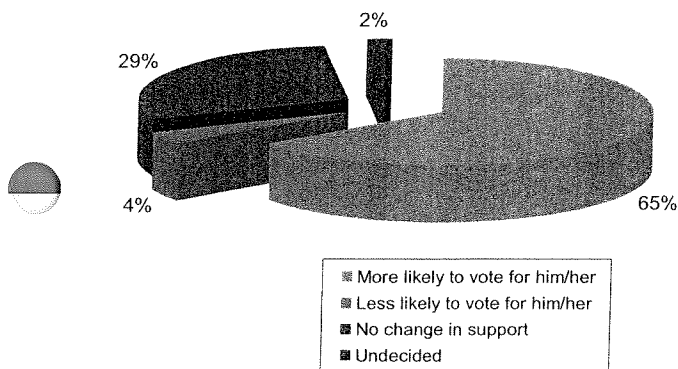
Do you think couples with children at home should be required to obtain counseling before a divorce is granted?



Support for Lawmakers Who Support Divorce Education (1999)

What we asked:

Think about a couple that has minor children and the parents want a divorce. If your state senator or representative voted for legislation to require parents to go through a divorce education program to learn about the impact of divorce on children before getting a divorce, would you be:



More likely to vote for him/her

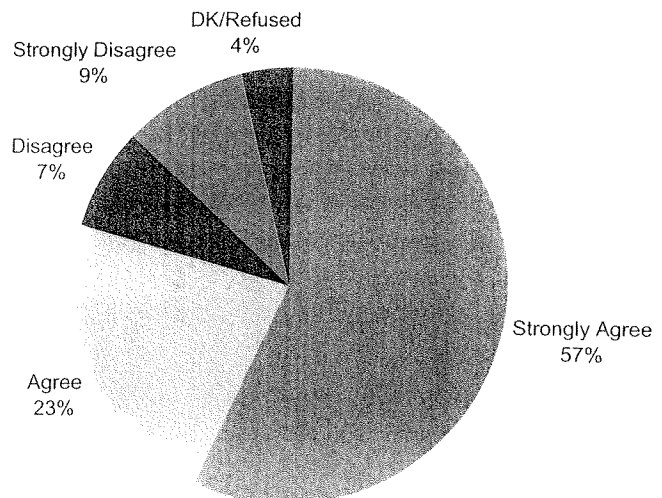
Less likely to vote for him/her

Not influenced either way

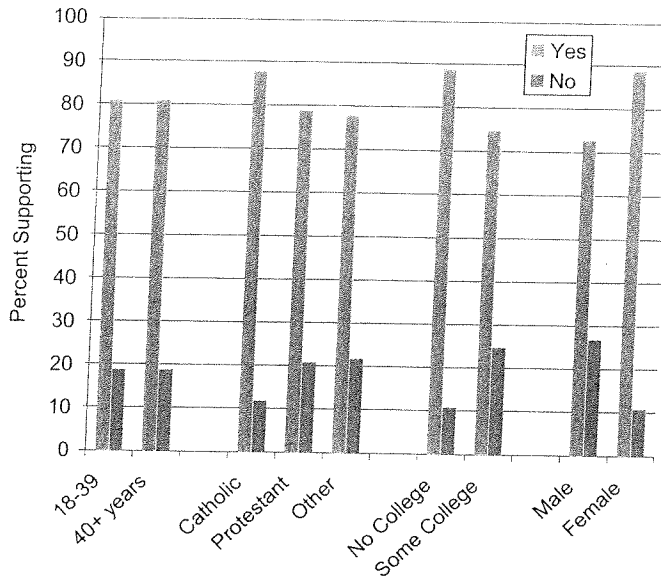
Should Divorce Education Be Required? (2004)

What we asked:

Think about a couple that has minor children and the parents want a divorce. Do you agree or disagree that couples with children at home should be required to go through a divorce education program to learn about the impact of divorce on children before getting a divorce?

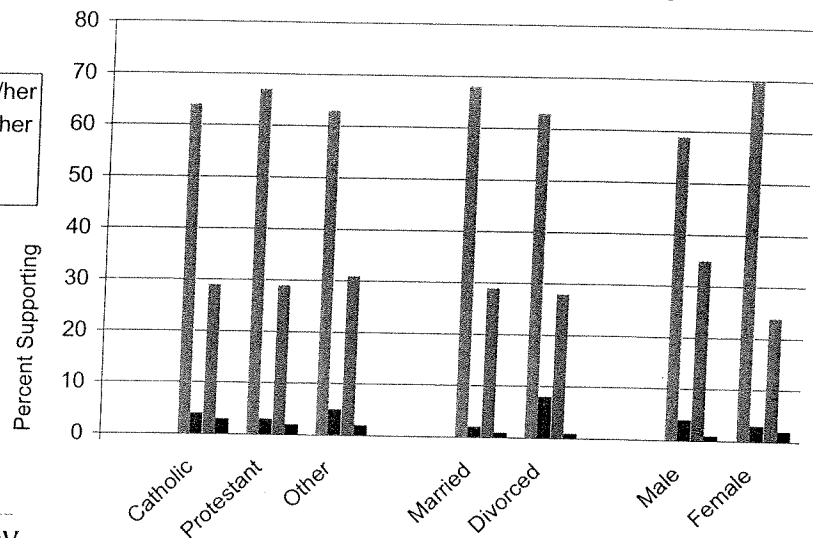


Support for Divorce Education by Category (1995)

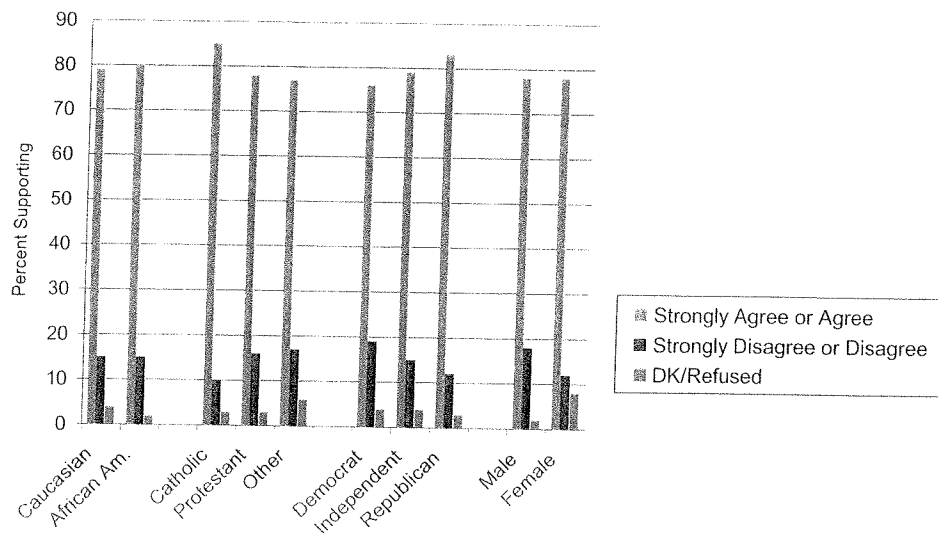


See page 5 for question wording used for these graphs.

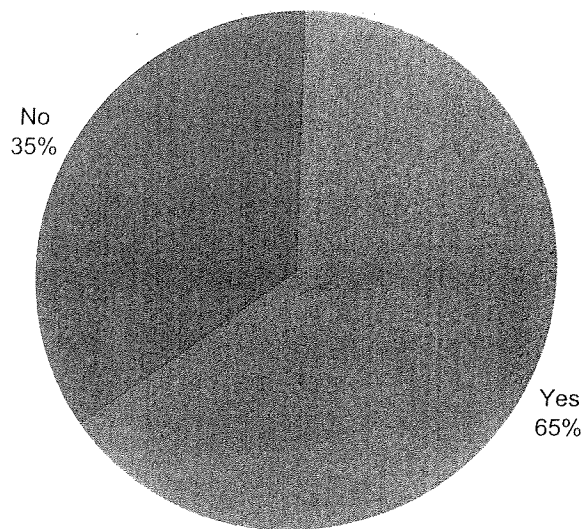
Support for Lawmakers Who Support Divorce Education by Category (1999)



Support for Divorce Education by Category (2004)



Could Premarital Education Play a Major Role in Preventing Divorce? (1995)



Fact: Three counties with worst ratio of divorces (D) to marriages (M) in 2003, displayed as percent:

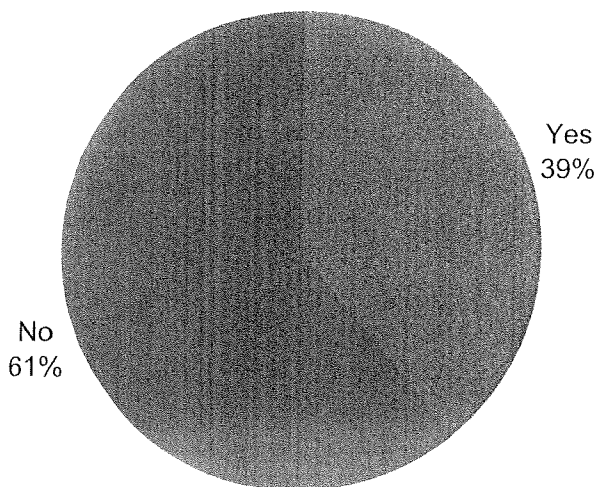
	D	M	Percent
1 Luce	34	36	94%
2 Lenawee	441	504	88%
3 Monroe	641	820	78%
Michigan	35,569	62,920	57%

Michigan Vital Records & Health Data, Michigan Department of Community Health

FACT: In 1903 there were nearly 9 marriages for every divorce that occurred in Michigan. In 2003 there were fewer than 2 marriages for every divorce.

Michigan Vital Records & Health Data, Michigan Department of Community Health

Percent of Michigan Couples Who Attended Premarital Education Programs

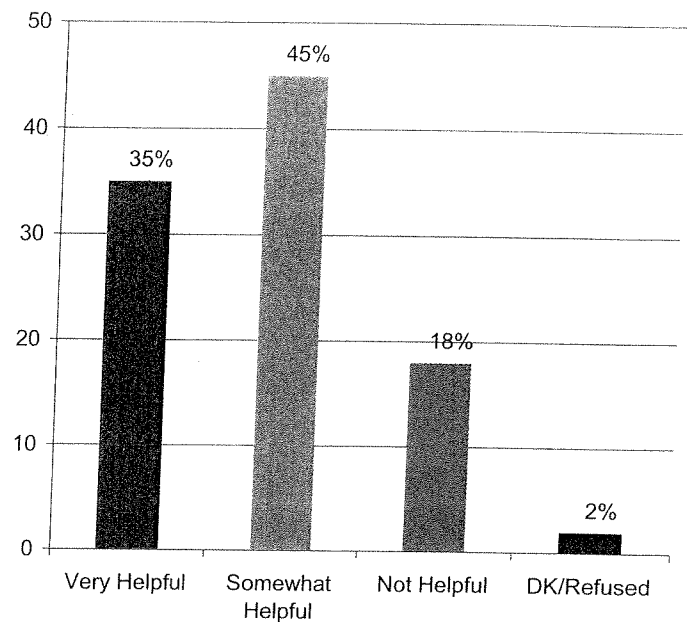


Mirroring national statistics, roughly 40 percent of Michigan couples participate in marriage education programs prior to getting married.

Helpfulness of Premarital Education (1997)

Eighty percent of participants found premarital education programs very helpful or somewhat helpful.

Studies show that such programs have a positive effect on couples for 6 months to 3 years.



FACT: The three counties with the highest divorce rate (number of people getting divorced per 1,000 population) in 2003 were:

- 1 Kalkaska 10.7
- 2 Barry 10.6
- 3 Mason 10.5
- Michigan 7.1

Michigan Vital Records & Health Data,
Michigan Department of Community Health

Support for Marriage Education/Enrichment Tax Credits (1999)

What we asked:

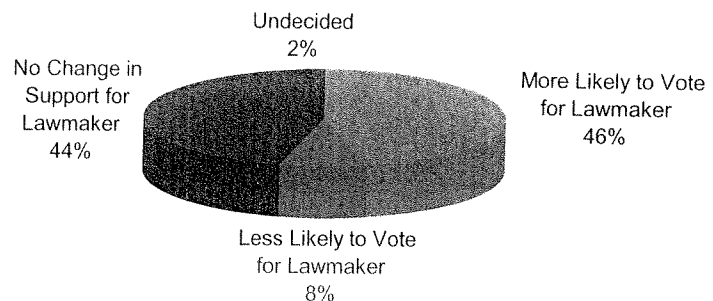
If your state senator or representative voted for legislation that would provide a \$50 tax credit for premarital counseling, marital enrichment or marriage counseling for troubled marriages, would you be:

More likely to vote for him/her

Less likely to vote for him/her

Wouldn't be influenced

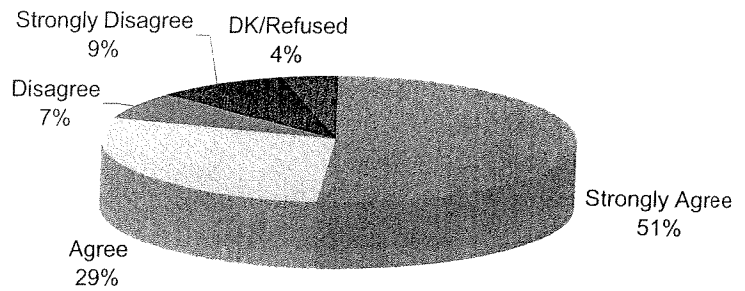
Undecided



Premarital Education Classes Could Help Strengthen Marriages (2004)

What we asked:

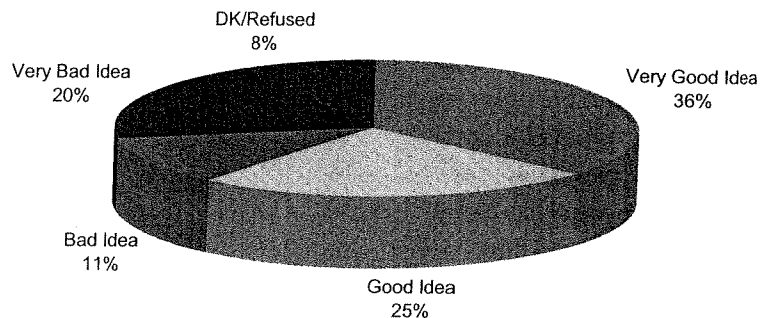
Now I want you to think about a premarital education class where engaged couples learn communication and conflict resolution skills. Do you agree or disagree that these types of programs can help strengthen marriages and reduce divorce problems?



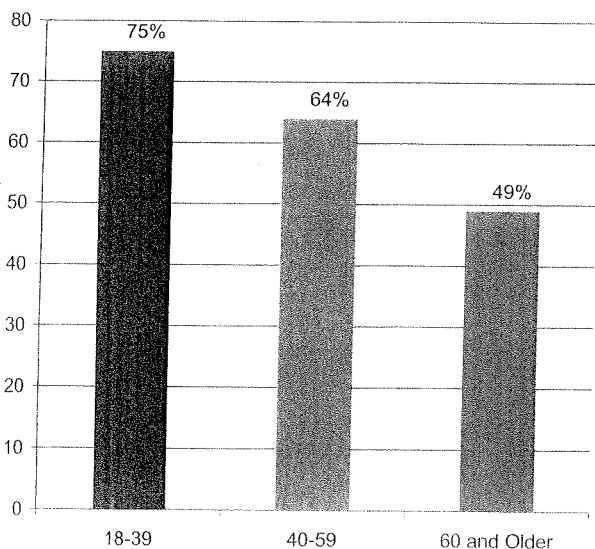
\$50 Tax Credit for Low-Income Couples (2004)

What we asked:

Do you think it would be a very good idea, somewhat good idea, somewhat bad idea, or a very bad idea for Michigan to offer a \$50 tax credit to low-income couples that take a premarital education class if they can't find a free class?



Support for Tax Credit by Age Group (2004)



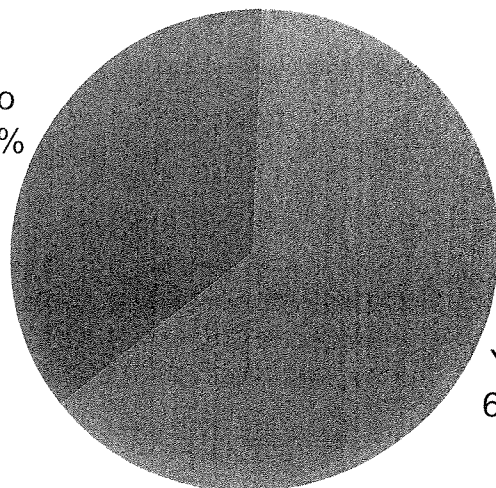
Younger voters who are closer to marrying age and more likely to take advantage of the tax credit are very supportive of the tax credit. Older voters who are more likely to be married already are less supportive.

Looking back, do you wish you and your ex-spouse had tried harder to work through your differences?
(1997, Divorced respondents only)

FACT: Median age at first marriage is 25 for brides and 27 for grooms.

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Michigan Department of Community Health

No
36%

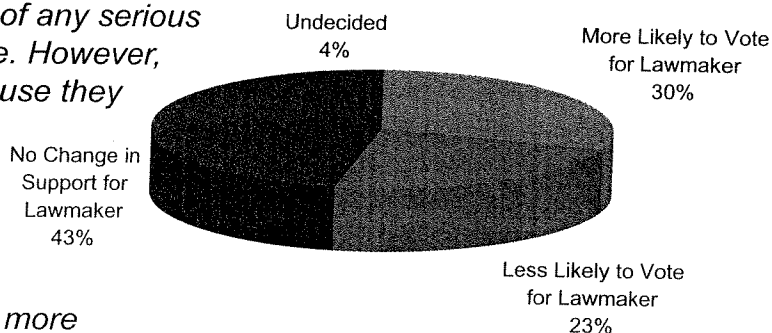


Yes
64%

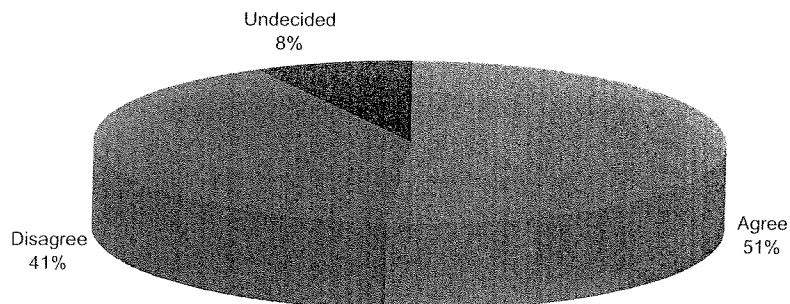
What we asked:

Think about a situation where one person does not want a divorce and they are not guilty of any serious fault, like adultery or domestic violence. However, the other spouse files for divorce because they feel the marriage is broken. If your state representative or senator voted for legislation that would award significantly more property or assets, say at least 65 percent, to the spouse who did not want the divorce, would you be more likely or less likely to vote for him or her?

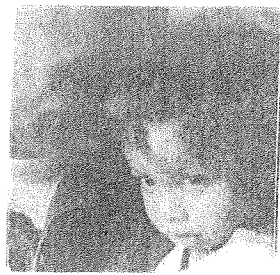
Financial Penalty for No-Fault Divorce (1999)



Marriage License Waiting Periods Based on Premarital Education Classes (2004)



Voters were ambivalent about using the marriage license waiting period as a "carrot and stick." When asked if the current three day waiting period should be eliminated for couples that get premarital education, but extended to seven days for those who do not, a scant majority (51%) said "Yes."



OTHER RESOURCES AVAILABLE

Family Guide to Internet Safety

Family Health Indicators: A Survey of Michigan Counties

Michigan Guide To Abstinence Resources

Promoting Fatherhood In Michigan:

A Resource Guide for Civic, Business, and Non-Profit Leaders

Sex Education: Rights and Responsibilities in Michigan Law

What Every Child Needs: The Unique Contributions of Fathers and Mothers

Family Policy Backgrounders

Drug Free Kids: Why Fathers Make a Difference

Family Fact Sheet

Five Myths in a Post-Marriage Culture

Marriage and Children's Health

Nonmarital Cohabitation

Second Chance Homes

Statutory Rape in Michigan

When Good Marriages Go Bad

ABOUT MICHIGAN FAMILY FORUM

Our Core Values

The family is the fundamental institution in a civil society.

Healthy, lifelong marriages are beneficial to adults and offer the best environment in which to raise children and care for our elders.

The involvement of responsible fathers is essential to the economic, emotional, and social health of our children.

Our children need the protection of stable families and a healthy understanding of human sexuality.

Our elders deserve to have security and care provided by loving family members in a comfortable home environment.

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